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Hindu Renaissance

The Mauritian Miracle

How the Hindus of Mauritius uplifted themselves, transformed their nation and became models for the world

by Vel Mahalingum

It has been my joy and that of my fellow Mauritians to be part of a dynamic revival of Hinduism in my country. The changes, positive and deep, affect our Hindu community and even our nation. Looking back 30 years, we see amazing change--a miraculous event, I am tempted to say. What began with an initiative from the Hindu Mauritian population was shaped by an energetic response by holy men and flourished with the blessings of our Gods.

In the dark days of the 1970s and 1980s, conversion from Hinduism to missionary faiths was rampant. Hindus fell easy victims to aggressive, often devious, proselytizing methods. The seeds of doubt were sown and watered every day as anti-Hindu ideas fluttered around, creeping into our minds. Resolute Hindus had few reasons to justify any hope, and a pervasive discouragement was setting in.

But in 1980, one of our elders, Retnon Velvindron, posted an impassioned letter to Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, publisher of Hinduism Today. Velvindron explained the situation and begged the Hawaii-based satguru to come help our community. Gurudeva--as Subramuniyaswami was affectionately known--responded right away, making two visits in quick succession and bringing a message to all Mauritians.

Subramuniyaswami beckoned, "Learn your religion well; build walls of intelligence around yourselves and your community. Understand the treasure you possess so well that no one can convince you otherwise. Be clear in your beliefs. Put the tenets

into practice so you experience directly the blessings that are your birthright. Then, when converters come to your door, tell them, 'I am sure your religion is a good one, but I also have a wonderful religion that fulfills me entirely. Thank you very much and good bye.'" He spoke to us like that, so simply, so directly and with such power. It was something new, a message we had never heard before. One person observed, even back then, "He has just made us conversion-proof."

Hinduism classes were soon established throughout the country, bringing the blessed understanding we needed. Here were the bricks for our wall of intelligence. Word spread quickly, especially about truths that countered awful misrepresentations of Hinduism that had hurt us for a long time. To the accusation that "Hindus worship stone," we learned the answer: "We don't worship stones! We worship God who, during puja, hovers in and around the murti. The murti is like a telephone we use to speak to someone--only a fool would think we are speaking to the telephone!" We suddenly had in our hands powerful teachings everyone could understand--and they spread like wildfire.

I can best relate the collective impact of the Hindu Renaissance of the 1980s and 1990s in Mauritius by focusing on my own guru's work. Being Gurudeva's disciple from the time of his first visit, I have naturally been in a good position to observe how he affected our community and country--how a guru works through his disciples to shed blessings over the land.

With proper study of spiritual books, layer after layer of our great religion was revealed to us common Hindus. Life-long religious practices took on new meanings and gave us fresh new goals, for we finally knew where we are headed.

We understood that we are all souls on a wondrous journey toward our full bloom. Not just us Hindus, but all of us: no one will be left out. God loves all of His children without exception. There is no eternal hell, no devil opposing God. God is everywhere, in everyone. We came to earth to realize our oneness with Him. These concepts were music from heaven, so fresh, so bright, so freeing they were. We were strengthened from the inside--suddenly lifted high.

The classes Gurudeva started continue to this day--as does the grassroots enthusiasm he ignited. We now have teachers training teachers. We have classes

for children using a course for children conceived by Gurudeva. And there is demand for more.

Along with the teachings, Gurudeva brought practice of Hindu precepts into our lives--in a way that was often challenging. We are still struggling with some of his instructions, his high standards of sadhana and purity. but mostly we have done well. Our efforts, though fallible, proved transformative.

Gurudeva often said he foresaw a great future for Mauritius, and he urged us to strive for prosperity, to modernize and take advantage of new technologies. At the time of his first visit, in 1981, we were a poor country, one-million-plus people on a little island with only a sugar monoculture to our name. It was quite a shift he was advocating.

The tools we received from him were both mystical and practical. He taught us to visualize abundance and to create it by repeating affirmations, thus molding our minds. He emphasized proper budgeting and financial responsibility. He required his close devotees to tithe (giving one tenth of one's income to a good cause) so as to open the inner doors of generosity and abundance in accordance to the infallible law of karma. He urged strict honesty in business dealings, tolerating no bribery or deceit--and bribery, truth be told, was a dark blemish of our culture that we had to work hard to shed. At times, it has taken courage to follow Gurudeva. But we, his closest followers, did it, bringing enormous rewards. We are now regarded as upright people who live dharmically and do not compromise on principle.

Today, our Hindu community prospers. All of Mauritius prospers and is recognized as a country that is moderately well off--a huge step forward. Virtually everyone now is fully conversant with digital tools. We surprise ourselves with what we can afford these days, and Mauritian well-being and contentment are at an all-time high.

And so, today, when I say conversion has now died down and nearly disappeared from the land, I feel I am dreaming. It could only have happened by the grace of our great Gods. I am sure they heard our desperate prayers.

How Hindus became better Hindus

Subramuniaswami, my Gurudeva, was not the only one who answered our plea. The Gods who heard us responded by sending powerful saints and swamis to these remote shores. Among them were Ma Amritanandamayi, Swami Chinmayananda, emissaries from Satya Sai Baba, Divine Life Society and the Ramakrishna Mission--each bringing his own tradition, generating enthusiasm, pouring out the teachings, and giving us back our pride and self-confidence.

When a holy man like Gurudeva said something to us, it went deep. In doing as he directed, there came a power which transformed us and our circumstances. That power, I am convinced, radiated out and helped others to also do the right thing.

Following the thrust of the guru often required strong commitments. Gurudeva embraced all Mauritian Hindus with equal love, but asked those who wanted to be his close devotees not only to bear Hindu names, but names from his particular Saivite denomination. If the devotee's name did not fit, he was to change it--legally. Mauritian family ties being so strong, this was a tall order. Gurudeva explained that Hinduism is composed of four principal sects (Smarta, Vaishnava, Saiva and Shakta) with important similarities and differences. Since we identify with our name, we needed a name that truly says, to ourself first, who we are. Much soul-searching ensued.

My family name used to be Renghen, a Vaishnava name. Finding myself thoroughly Saivite, I changed it to Mahalingum, which means a lot to me. Each time I hear it, I picture our most sacred icon, which represents to me my ultimate purpose and destiny. Now when I say, "I am a Hindu," I know exactly what I mean, precisely what beliefs I hold, where I am going and how I am getting there. The community at large takes note of the strength our names give us, and one of the results, today, is that Mauritian Hindus no longer give Western nick-names to their children, as they used to do.

Our cultural identity was also affected by this profound change. Previously, Hindu clothes were what poor Mauritians wore and therefore carried little prestige. Rich, educated Mauritians wore European suits, so unfit and awkward for our climate, but an external sign of prosperity. It was, however, also a token of cultural submission. In this, too, Gurudeva blazed a new trail, asking us to proudly and unhesitatingly proclaim our Hinduness in the silent but tangible language of clothing. It has caught

on in a big way, and today you'll see Gurudeva's shishyas coming to temples only dressed in elegant Hindu clothes. These make us feel good, and our appearance definitely creates respect for Hindus and Hinduism.

Lord Ganesha comes to Mauritius

Devotion needs sacred spaces to be fully practiced by the devout. Chief among them are temples, and several were founded in the last two decades in Mauritius. Dear to my heart is the Spiritual Park in Riviere du Rempart, a peaceful and naturally beautiful haven by the Indian Ocean founded by Gurudeva. It is not a temple, but has a powerful shrine to Lord Ganesha as Panchamukha Ganapati. It is a one-of-a-kind, wooden shrine built in the Kerala style with thatched roof, the first ever crafted outside of India. In it a majestic eight-foot-tall, five-faced, ten-armed Ganapati looks over azure blue seas facing India--a towering reminder of the original home of the nation's Hindus.

The Spiritual Park started with a vision Gurudeva had of Ganesha in 1986, and as we learned both in theory and in practice, such endeavors are blessed from the start and carry a power of their own. In that same year Gurudeva acquired this riverside property as a monastery and converted the chalet-style bungalow on the west side into a monastic residence, where his monks lived and served. A few years later, he dedicated six acres of his Saiva Dharmasala as a place of worship and contemplation. In 1999 he traveled to Mauritius to publicly inaugurate the Spiritual Park as a gift to the island nation.

People who go there to worship Ganesha look splendid in their Hindu attire. Every month more than 3,000 people from all over the island gather there, women in colorful saris, men in elegantly embroidered kurtas. We have become proud of our heritage, and what a rich one it is.

Ganesha has always been important to our particular community, with Marathi origins, but the rest of us did not know Him well. Gurudeva taught that Ganesha belongs to, and unifies, all Hindus. We can attest to that, as ever more Hindus of every denomination, every community, and even non-Hindus come to worship Him at the Spiritual Park. No other society in Mauritius attracts so many people every month.

Today, Ganesha Chaturthi is celebrated with great pomp by all of our Hindu communities, not only the Marathis. A record-breaking and euphoric 8,000 people attended our last Ganesha Chaturthi celebrations at the Spiritual Park in 2009.

Ancient mysticism in daily life

The Spiritual Park was consecrated as one of the rare places on earth today where an ancient tantra is practiced, that of writing prayers that are offered into the homa fire. This is a means of communication between the inner and outer worlds, as devonic helpers pick up the prayers and carefully ponder and act on every request. This has become popular at each homa--which happens on the first Sunday of every month--when thousands of prayers are offered into the fire. The results are remarkable, people's lives are changed and at each gathering testimonials abound.

At home we learned to perform a simple Ganesha puja that anyone can do. Today, many Mauritians celebrate that puja faithfully, every day, and enjoy the blessings that ensue. Mature Hindus who are vegetarian and not too prone to anger were encouraged by Gurudeva to do the more elaborate atmartha puja in their home shrine. These pujas also have now spread far and wide. Many Hindus who used to unceremoniously get up in the morning, put on their coat and tie and dash off to work, now rise earlier, don their veshtis or dhoties and do their puja followed by sadhana and meditation. The whole vibration of their home is transformed and those they meet during the day absorb some of the peace. Neighbors notice and soon start doing the puja themselves, bringing more blessings into their life, and contributing to the general uplift. Certainly, this augurs well for the future of Hinduism and Mauritius.

In my Marathi culture, as it is common to most Hindus, we have always had lots of temples that were the heart of our communities. All that we did, all that we were and strived to be, revolved around the temple. My grandfather was a pandaram priest and we were steeped in temple lore. Yet, something was missing. Tradition had become dogma and the true meanings of many practices were forgotten. Again, Gurudeva filled the gap. He explained the temple's esoterics, just how these holy shrines open channels of communication to our great Gods, and how we can take advantage of our temple for a sublime life.

I remember his phrase, "Temples provide food for the soul," each time I go to a temple. These clear explanations, combined with our natural bhakti, redoubled our

love of temples. We already had so many--and yet we have built more and upgraded our old ones. We have acquired larger, finer murtis from India, More and more priests from India are living among us and conducting special rituals. Probably not coincidentally, many of the temples Gurudeva visited have since been rebuilt, some of them as exquisite Agamic gems.

Grace and boons from the Guru

I would most humbly suggest that anyone pondering how to uplift his community or country take note of our experience. By the grace of Gods and guru, we have been able to pull ourselves up. I believe sister and brother Hindus everywhere can benefit from the lessons we learned--even if they are already in a good situation, for there is always more to do.

One of the powers of the guru, we found, is to bestow spiritual treasures, almost endlessly, on those devotees who respond to his instructions. But they are not always easy to follow. Mauritian Hindus have, overall, responded well to Gurudeva's instructions, but there are a few areas where we are having difficulty.

Gurudeva was shocked to find so many of us sending our children to Catholic schools. With Catholic impressions in their young minds, he explained, it will be nearly impossible for them to be clear-minded Hindus later on, and they will be easy to convert. "Stop this at once," he pleaded. But today, unfortunately, Catholic schools are still irresistible to many Hindus, and children still spend their delicate, formative years in a Catholic atmosphere.

Some courageous ones I know did pull their children out. Were their children deprived of a good education? No. Those they grew up very well, have all gone on to fine universities and become competent professionals. Our public schools are excellent, and I am convinced it is just a matter of time until on our community realizes there is no justification for subjecting the children to contrary beliefs.

Another challenging directive from Gurudeva was for married women among his shishyas not to hold jobs. He patiently delineated the many benefits that far outweigh the extra income. His basic idea was to protect the family from the many forces that work against it today. When a mother is able to spend time managing her home, peace and harmony are more likely to come. But many fear economic

hardship, or the wife fears she will be bored, or have a lesser self-image.

Close devotees of Gurudeva have made this adjustment and are all very happy. One, for example, was a professional career woman who caught on to the importance of this teaching and abandoned her career. Today her children are happy, her husband is happy, and so is she--far from being bored. She volunteers her spare time to teach Hinduism to children, has time for consistent sadhana and meditation, and says that her life is now much more interesting and fulfilling than before.

Though the community is moving slowly on these difficult points, I think that, as sadhana, meditation and the worship of Ganesha continue to grow, slowly more and more families will better be able to evaluate the various options for their life and make good choices.

Gurudeva revealed to us many of Hinduism's potent and magical facets--not always through explanation, but often by what he did all over the world and what he represented. These paradigms continue to capture our imaginations. His life and his monastery remind us, deep within, of our legends of old. But we have Hinduism Today to prove that it all really does exist, and in the magazine's pages we constantly rediscover the magnificence of our religion and the breathtaking renaissance of the Hindu world.

Take Swami Gopal Sharan Devacharya, for example, the 2009 Hindu of the Year. As former British subjects, we were quite struck with the image of his putting a shawl on the Queen's shoulders. How else would we know even of the existence of modern Hindu heroes, if not for Hinduism Today?

Even in his passing, Gurudeva empowered us. He allowed us to see, in the person of his successor Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami, the power of the guru transferred from one generation to the next. We can now be confident that Hinduism here will move from strength to strength. Twenty years from now, a new generation of Mauritians will tell, probably in these same pages, about wondrous new developments that, in 2010, no one could have imagined.

I hope these humble thoughts may encourage other devotees to trust the power of their own guru. It will enrich all of us. For there is really only one guru--as my guru taught us--and we are indescribably blessed to have known him in the person of my Gurudeva.

Brahmachari Vel Mahalingum, 55, is a successful businessman in Mahebourg, Mauritius, where his family runs a bakery and a sari shop. This piece is translated from the original French.